Creating a Culture of Agile Leaders:

A Developmental Approach

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The globalized economy and the spread of connective technologies force the pace of change and the degree of complexity to shift for organizations to an entirely new level. To enjoy sustained success in this turbulent environment, organizations in all sectors need to develop a level of agility that matches this unprecedented level of change and complexity. This means learning to navigate constant change and to effectively manage increasing interdependencies with customers, strategic allies and other stakeholders—including the planet itself.

As James McNerney, the respected CEO of Boeing says, "Institutionally, the ability to be agile enough is the gut issue in leading an organization today" (Geoffrey, 2006). Yet most of today's organizations operate at a level of *agility* better suited for a less-demanding era (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2009).

Who will create and lead the agile organizations we need? The answer must be agile leaders. There is a huge need for agile leaders and leadership cultures that model and support agility across the enterprise. To help make this happen human resource executives need to gain a clear understanding of what leadership agility is, how it can be assessed and how increased levels of agility can be developed—in executives, in high-potential managers and throughout the organization.

What is Leadership Agility?

Leadership agility is the ability to lead effectively when rapid change and uncertainty are the norm and when success requires consideration of multiple views and priorities. It requires a process of using enhanced awareness and intentionality to increase effectiveness under real-time conditions: stepping back from whatever one is focused on, gaining a broader perspective and bringing new insight into what needs to be done next.

Through our in-depth research on leadership agility, Stephen Joseph and I found that highly agile leaders actually use four kinds of agility to complete successful initiatives (Joiner & Joseph, 2007):

- **Context-setting agility** enables leaders to scan their environment, anticipate important changes, decide what initiatives they need to take, scope these initiatives and determine needed outcomes. Highly agile leaders can be visionary. At the same time, when called for by specific situations, they can "downshift" into strategic or tactical direction setting.

- **Stakeholder agility** allows leaders to identify the key stakeholders of an initiative, understand their views and priorities, determine where greater alignment is needed and forge greater alignment. Highly agile leaders are decisive, yet they can understand and appreciate frames of reference that differ from their own. They seek input from key stakeholders not simply to gain buy-in, but because they feel that genuine dialogue will improve the quality and effectiveness of their decisions and their initiatives.

- **Creative agility** empowers leaders to transform complex, novel problems and opportunities into desired results. As leaders increase their agility, they become more comfortable with novelty and uncertainty. Because they clearly understand the limitations of any single perspective, they encourage the expression of multiple viewpoints and the questioning of underlying assumptions. Their willingness to experience the tension between differing views and criteria gives them enhanced abilities to discover practical creative solutions to challenging problems.

- **Self-leadership agility** allows leaders to accelerate their own development by determining the kinds of leaders they want to be, use their everyday initiatives to experiment toward these aspirations and then reflect on and learn from these experiences. Highly agile leaders want to increase their awareness of behaviors, feelings and assumptions that would normally escape their conscious attention.

They are motivated to more fully align their behavior with their values and aspirations. As a result, they are more proactive in seeking and using feedback and in experimenting with new mindsets and behaviors.

What Robert Did

The real-life case of "Robert," a top executive in a Canadian oil corporation, illustrates what highly agile leadership can look like. Robert is one of those rare leaders (fewer than 10 percent, according to the research) whose agility level matches that of the current business environment. His approach to leading change differed from that of his predecessor, an executive whose level of agility was better suited to a rapidly passing era.

Robert had just been named president of the oil corporation's refining and retailing company. Competitively, the company was positioned around the middle of the pack in a mature, margin-sensitive market where long-range demand was projected to be flat. With little to distinguish it from other regionals in the price and quality of its products, its earnings were going steadily downhill. Its future looked dismal.

In his newly promoted position, Robert faced the biggest leadership challenge of his career. The company badly needed a short-term increase in its stock price, and Robert's predecessor had focused like a laser on achieving this objective. Seeing stockholders and customers as the company's key stakeholders, he had done everything an experienced oil company executive would do to raise the stock price. He had taken many steps to make the company more efficient, including a series of layoffs, but these steps had not produced the desired results. Privately, he had been consid-

ering which division would have to be sold or shut down. By the time Robert became president, morale within the company was at an all-time low. People at all levels were frustrated and unhappy. The whole organization was in a state of fear, and everything was truly up for grabs.

Within a short period of time, Robert took a stance that initially seemed counterintuitive. So far, the company had been unable to raise its stock price, yet Robert set out to achieve much more than that. He articulated a vision to transform the company into the best regional in North America. In fact, he wanted to develop an organization whose business performance and innovative ways of operating would be benchmarked by companies from a wide variety of industries.

As he put it, "In archery and karate, they teach you to shoot through the target." In other words, as they moved toward this vision, he believed the stock price would increase. By putting the stock price goal in this larger context, Robert overturned his predecessor's assumption that the company's options were limited to difficult but familiar cost-cutting solutions. Instead, he decided to develop a set

of breakout strategies that would result in a more innovative organization.

In contrast to his predecessor, Robert realized that he and his top management group might not have all the answers. He hired a world-class strategy consulting firm. He also set up 10 "idea factories:" creative strategic thinking sessions, where employees and other stakeholders, including environmental advocates, developed ideas for the top team to consider. People responded with enthusiasm, generating a huge number of ideas.

Robert then held a two-day retreat where he and his top management group synthesized the strategy firm's ideas with those generated by the idea factories. As he put it later, "We tried to involve as many people as possible in the strategic review process. We invested time and energy up front to listen to people, build trust and get everyone aligned. It paid off, because we started to think with one brain. Instead of being at cross purposes, we could understand and support each other's decisions."

The new strategies that emerged went well beyond those Robert, his team, and the strategy firm would have generated on their own. The strategic review resulted in a smaller, more agile organization with a much stronger "people strategy" designed to catapult the company into the ranks of high-performing organizations. When the new game plan was ready, he and his executive team presented it to the employees before they announced it to the market.

The presentation included some bad news, but when it ended people applauded. During the months that followed, Robert and his team repeatedly communicated their new vision and its implications for employees in many different forums. As the new strategies were implemented, they kept everyone updated on the performance of the business. Every year, Robert met with each of the company's 20 management teams to discuss objectives and strategies and check for alignment. Robert's participative approach to transforming his organization not only led to innovative strategies, it developed the commitment, trust and alignment necessary to implement them reliably and effectively.

As a result, during the next three years Robert and his executive team were able to lead the company through an amazing turnaround. At the end of this period, the company not only survived without selling any of its divisions, it entered a phase of aggressive growth. During that period, annual earnings went from $9 million to $40 million, and cash expenses were reduced by $40 million a year. The bottom line was that the company was clearing $71 million a year more than it was when he took over.

In the business press, the company went from being a "bad bet" to "one of the darlings of the stock market." A once-faltering company had become one of the most efficient and effective refiners in North America and one of the top retailers in its marketplace.

This amazing turnaround is directly attributable to Robert's ability to consistently embody many of the key characteristics of highly agile leaders: His predecessor's approach to context-setting was to focus squarely on the achievement of essential strategic objectives. Robert's approach was to frame the achievement of these objectives in a broader context, thinking beyond his industry and expanding strategic objectives to include the development of a culture of participation, empowerment, and teamwork.

Robert's predecessor focused on stockholders and customers as the key stakeholders. Robert included a broader range of stakeholders in his strategic review, opening the process to a wider range of viewpoints. He achieved alignment and commitment, where his predecessor's actions had inadvertently created an environment of fear and decreased productivity.

Robert's commitment to creative problem solving was especially striking. Rather than assume that only top executives and expert consultants could solve the company's problems, he saw the need for fresh ideas generated from a variety of different perspectives. In fact, about one-third of the new strategies that were implemented came exclusively from the idea factories.

Levels of Leadership Agility

Unfortunately, both broad experience and the research on leadership agility indicate that leaders like Robert are difficult to find. In addition, despite inspired efforts by leadership development professionals, when the competencies that Robert exhibited are taught, they often do not "stick," even for executives and high-potential managers.

Are agile leaders simply born that way? Or, do they have a unique personality and back-

TABLE 1: THE EXPERT, ACHIEVER AND CATALYST LEVELS OF LEADERSHIP AGILITY			
	Expert	**Achiever**	**Catalyst**
Assumptions About Leadership	**Tactical, problem-solving orientation**. Assumes that leaders are respected and followed by others because of their expertise and authority.	**Strategic, outcome orientation**. Believes that leaders motivate others by making it challenging and satisfying to contribute to larger objectives.	**Visionary, facilitative orientation**. Assumes that leadership involves the articulation of an innovative, inspiring vision and bringing the right people together to transform vision into reality. Feels that leadership is about empowering others and actively facilitating their development.
Pivotal Conversations	*Either* strongly assertive *or* very accommodative in dealing with differences. May flip from assertive to accommodative and the reverse. Tendency to avoid giving or requesting feedback.	Primarily assertive or accommodative with some ability to compensate with the less preferred style. Will accept or even initiate feedback, if seen as helpful in achieving desired outcomes.	Skilled in balancing assertive and accommodative styles as needed in specific situations. Likely to identify and question underlying assumptions, including their own. Genuinely interested in learning from diverse viewpoints. Proactively seeks and utilizes feedback.
Leading Teams	More a supervisor than a manager. Creates more of a group of individuals than a team. Works primarily one-on-one with direct reports. Too caught up in details to lead strategically.	Operates like a full-fledged manager. Meetings to discuss important strategic or organizational issues are often orchestrated to gain buy-in to own views.	Intent upon creating a highly participative team. Acts as both team leader and facilitator. Models and seeks an open exchange of viewpoints on challenging issues. Empowers direct reports. Uses team development initiatives as vehicles for individual leadership development.
Leading Organizational Change	Organizational change initiatives are focused primarily on incremental improvements inside unit boundaries with relatively little attention to stakeholders.	Organizational initiatives include analysis of external environment. Strategies to gain stakeholder buy-in range from one-way communication to solicitation of input.	Organizational change initiatives often include development of a culture that promotes teamwork, participation, and empowerment. Proactive engagement with diverse stakeholders reflects a belief that this input will increase the quality of decisions, not just gain buy-in.

Adapted from Joiner and Josephs (2007).

ground that make them difficult to emulate? Fortunately the research on leadership agility suggests a more optimistic conclusion: The behaviors exhibited by highly agile leaders are made possible by a distinct set of mental and emotional capacities that can be learned and developed. Moreover, these capacities develop in stages. As leaders develop from one stage to another, these capacities allow them to develop entirely new levels of leadership agility. These agility levels can be assessed, and—when the right kind of training, coaching and facilitation are provided—leaders, teams and leadership cultures can develop new levels of agility.

These findings emerged by looking at leaders through the lens of stage-development psychology—a field that began in the 1920s with Jean Piaget's research on stages of childhood development (Piaget, 1954; Flavell, 1965). During the second half of the last century, it expanded to include stages of adult development (Fowler, 1981; Kegan, 1982; King & Kitchener, 1994; Kohlberg, 1981; Loevinger, 1976; Perry, 1999; Richards & Commons, 1984; Wilber, 2000).

Developmental stages should not be confused with thinking styles, learning styles, or personality types. People of all styles and types can be found at every stage (Joiner & Josephs, 2007; Wilber, 2000). Stages are progressive levels of mental and emotional growth. As adults evolve through these stages, they develop the capacity for more complex thought and find it easier to understand and empathize with differing viewpoints. Adults do not *automatically* progress through these stages as they age (Kegan, 1982, 1994; Kohlberg, 1981; Loevinger, 1976). However, people who have plateaued in their development can reignite this growth process when exposed to appropriate conditions (Joiner & Josephs, 2007; Torbert & Associates, 2004).

During the 1980s and 1990s, William R. Torbert and his associates conducted research that found that leaders at more advanced stages were more effective in a variety of leadership tasks (Fisher, Rooke, & Torbert, 2000; Merron, 1985; Rooke & Torbert, 1998; Smith, 1980; Torbert, 1991). In 2001, inspired by these studies, Stephen Josephs and I launched a multi-year research project to develop a

more systematic and practical understanding of the relationship between developmental stages and leadership effectiveness.

We chose the five most relevant adult stages and gave them names that emphasize their characteristics in action contexts: Expert, Achiever, Catalyst, Co-Creator and Synergist. Quantitative and qualitative data from 604 managers were examined in detail to discover relationships among these stages and leadership behavior in three distinct arenas: leading organizational change, leading teams and engaging in pivotal conversations (Joiner & Josephs, 2007).

Our research found that managers at different stages clearly exhibit qualitatively different leadership behaviors, while retaining the capabilities they developed at previous stages. Table 1 provides brief descriptions of managers at the agility levels most relevant to today's leadership development challenges: Expert, Achiever and Catalyst.

About 45 percent of the management population is Experts and 35 percent are Achievers. ➤

Only about 5 percent are Catalysts, 4 percent are Co-Creators and 1 percent are Synergist leaders. The remaining 10 percent are pre-Expert. Co-Creators and Synergists are highly principled, true servant leaders (Greenleaf, 1977) with a deeply felt sense of life purpose. They seek to create shared visions with other principled leaders and to forge stakeholder relationships characterized by deep levels of mutual influence and genuine dedication to the common good.

Co-Creators and Synergists are inspiring leaders who provide a glimpse of the possible longer-term future of leadership development. However, experience and research indicate that the most frequently experienced leadership development challenges for the great majority of today's organizations can be met by developing existing Expert leadership cultures to the Achiever level and existing Achiever cultures to the Catalyst level.

Developing a Culture of Agile Leadership

Traditionally, leadership development initiatives have focused on the growth of the individual leader. However, applying a systems perspective broadens the view of leadership development to include a complementary focus on the development of intact leadership teams and leadership cultures. A company's leadership culture is a distinct and powerful part of its organizational culture. Specifically, it is an expression of the implicit assumptions and values its managers share about effective leadership, as well as the shared norms and practices that shape leadership behavior.

To focus simultaneously on the development of agility in individual leaders, intact leadership teams and leadership cultures, organizations need to supplement rather than replace current practices. The first steps are to assess the leadership culture, clarify the desired leadership culture and engage the executive team in a process of parallel assessment and visioning regarding its own development.

The best sequence of these initial steps for a particular organization depends on its unique history and situation. Facilitation of the desired change in the leadership culture requires a focus on the usual leverage points required for culture change—individual and team coaching, senior executive involvement, competency models and leadership development programs—but with particular attention to the characteristics of individual, team, and organizational agility levels.

Assessing Levels of Leadership Agility

Many organizations already conduct aggregate, "bench strength" assessments of key groups of leaders, using the criteria specified in their competency model. An assessment of leadership agility can be readily added to this process. For example, our *ChangeWise Leadership Agility Bench Strength Assessment*™ produces an aggregate assessment of the percentage of managers currently operating at the Expert, Achiever and Catalyst levels in three key leadership arenas: leading organizational change, improving team performance and engaging in pivotal business conversations.

While undeniably valuable, aggregate assessments have one limitation: They assume that

the "whole" (leadership culture) can be inferred from the sum of the "parts" (individual leaders). Yet the level of agility in an organization's leadership culture has a powerful influence on an individual manager's behavior, regardless of his or her personal agility level. Therefore, it is important to assess not only the agility levels of individual managers but also, at least informally, the agility level that predominates in the overall leadership culture.

The key characteristics of Expert, Achiever and Catalyst leadership cultures are fairly distinct:

- In **Expert leadership cultures** managers tend to operate within silos with little emphasis on cross-functional teamwork. Organizational improvements are mainly tactical and incremental. Managers tend to be overly involved in their subordinates work, fighting fires and interacting with direct reports one-on-one. As a result, managers have little time to approach their own roles strategically.

- In **Achiever leadership cultures** managers articulate strategic objectives and make sure they have the right people and processes in place to achieve these objectives. Managers work to develop effective teams, orchestrating them to achieve important outcomes. This is a customer-centric culture that encourages and rewards customer-focused cross-functional teamwork. Change initiatives typically reflect an analysis of the larger environment, and consultation with key stakeholders is a cultural norm.

- **Catalyst leadership cultures** are animated by a compelling vision that includes high levels of participation, empowerment and teamwork. Collaboration, decisiveness and candid, constructive conversation are norms. Senior teams become living laboratories that create this kind of culture within the team and work together to promote and encourage this culture in the organizations they lead. Leaders not only coach their people, they also actively solicit informal feedback and work to change their behaviors in ways that are beneficial to the organization and themselves.

In assessing leadership culture, it is important to keep in mind that, while a company's overall leadership culture typically has many uniform elements throughout, it is not unusual to find somewhat different agility levels in cultures found at different managerial levels.

Thus, it is useful to ask what level (or levels) of agility predominates in the top tiers, among middle managers and in the lower management ranks.

Organizations that have assessed agility levels in their leadership culture have typically identified Catalyst leaders here and there, and some note pockets in the organization where the culture has Catalyst characteristics. However, even in companies that have enjoyed a good deal of past success, the top-level leadership culture tends to be strongly Achiever, while the middle-level culture is often strongly Expert. At the same time, individual Expert managers can be found in top executive groups, and Achievers can be found at the middle levels. Sometimes high-potential managers, who tend to be high-functioning Achievers, often with Catalyst leanings, are held back by Expert managers to whom they report.

Clarifying the Desired Leadership Culture

An organization is most effective when its agility level matches the pace of change and the degree of interdependence in its internal and external work environment. Generally speaking, if the rate of change is rapid but episodic, an Achiever leadership culture is likely to be a good fit. If the pace of change is somewhere between rapid and constant, a Catalyst leadership culture is probably needed.

The other factor to consider is the degree of interdependence: the extent to which the organization's sustained success depends on effective coordination with other organizations and among internal units. If consistent success requires a moderate level of coordination, an Achiever culture is probably adequate. But if the business need for coordination is extensive, a Catalyst culture likely is required.

Almost invariably, the appropriate conclusion in today's turbulent economy is that a Catalyst leadership culture is needed, at least at the top levels. In addition, if the current middle management culture is predominantly Expert, movement to an Achiever culture in this tier is likely to yield an enormous improvement. Further, many companies are introducing Achiever-level methodologies at the bottom levels of the organization. The current interest in "lean" is a good example (Womack & Jones, 2003). Not surprisingly, these methodologies work best when an Achiever-level leadership culture is developed as part of the change effort.

For these changes to take place, not everyone at the top needs to become a Catalyst, and not everyone at the middle levels needs to become an Achiever. However, the percentage of Catalyst in the senior ranks needs to increase, the percentage of Achiever middle managers needs to increase and attention needs to be given to shifting the overall leadership culture at the top and middle levels. This means increasing the quality of teamwork, both internally and with other teams; building stronger cross-functional relationships; and developing an organizational culture that supports needed levels of agility. Once a new leadership culture genuinely takes hold, its norms begin to influence everyone's behavior, regardless of their agility level (Joiner, 2002).

One concern sometimes raised when discussing an organization's optimal agility level is this: If many of the organization's Expert middle managers learn to lead at the Achiever level, who will do all the tactical work that needs to be accomplished on a daily basis? This is a good question and requires a thoughtful response.

When middle-management cultures operate at the Expert level, as many do, managers tend to become overly involved in the details of their subordinates' work. When this kind of culture becomes more Achiever-like, middle managers take a more strategic approach to their own roles and delegate much of the tactical work to lower-level managers. In addition, Achiever managers at any organizational level still retain the ability and inclination to do tactical work when needed. Catalyst leadership cultures at the senior levels can utilize an even broader range of capabilities, because they can function well at three levels: visionary, strategic and tactical.

A concern also can arise if Expert leadership is equated with expertise. The two are not the same. In many ways, expertise is the lifeblood of any business. However, Expert leadership cultures limit the way in which this expertise is used. Achiever and Catalyst leaders retain and build on the kinds of expertise they developed at previous agility levels. At the same

time, they are less wedded to their expertise. Consequently, it is easier for them to manage and collaborate with others, acknowledging their areas of proficiency. Expertise is best utilized in Achiever and Catalyst leadership cultures, where it is used for clear strategic or even visionary ends.

Finally, do not confuse levels of agility with leadership styles. Facilitating development to a new level of agility is not about forcing a uniform leadership style on the organization. The whole range of differing personality, thinking and leadership styles exist at each level of agility. Effectively utilized, this diversity of styles can contribute in important ways to an organization's agility and effectiveness.

Working with Executive Teams

No culture change effort is likely to be successful unless the organization's top executives champion it (Kotter, 1996). When a change in leadership culture is needed, especially toward the Catalyst level, full-fledged leadership of the change by the executive team is absolutely essential. This team needs to learn to embody the new culture in its daily interactions with one another and with those they lead.

A newly hired Catalyst CEO who was seven months into the revitalization of a once-successful business described it this way: "In many ways [working with my executive team] is like a laboratory. I'm trying to develop an executive team that can serve as the prototype of a participative culture, which

> Once a new leadership culture genuinely takes hold, its norms begin to influence everyone's behavior, regardless of their agility level.

they can then disseminate to the rest of the organization." (Joiner & Josephs, 2007)

Catalyst executives often have the foresight to hold off on "rolling out" a culture-change process until they and their executive team have at least begun to embody the desired culture in their everyday actions. This, of course, makes top-level team development work an essential and preliminary part of the process.

To foster increased agility in an executive team, it is helpful to guide them through an assessment of the pace of change and degree ➤

of interdependence in their own external and internal environments, similar to the organizational assessment described earlier. This can lead to a discussion of the team's optimal agility level: Given the results of the environmental assessment, what level of *executive team agility* would likely lead to optimal business performance? Many executive teams have never discussed the kind of leadership they want to encourage on their team and in their organization.

The executive team also needs to assess its agility level. Expert teams tend to operate in a "hub-and-spoke" pattern. Group members are coordinated by the manager, who focuses more on supervising individual members than on developing the team as a whole. As a result, the Expert "team" is not so much a true team as a collection of individual contributors. Achiever teams are real teams of a sort. Led by a manager who feels a responsibility to bring people together and motivate them, Achiever teams engage in important strategic and operational discussions, though these are often orchestrated to guide people to the "right" decisions.

Catalyst teams are true high performing teams, characterized by robust participation: frank discussion, skillful listening and high-quality problem solving and decision making. Catalyst team leaders develop a significant level of trust within the team that allows them to move *explicitly* from consensus decisions to unilateral decisions and back again, as needed, while retaining the team's commitment.

Facilitating Change: Individual and Team Coaching

When the current agility levels of the executive team and organization have been assessed and the desired agility levels clarified, there is usually a gap between current and desired levels.

Developmental activities can be initiated to close the gap. One methodology that can contribute significantly to these changes is coaching based on 360-degree feedback, beginning with the top executive and his or her team. The company's usual 360 instrument (which typically reflects its competency model) can be supplemented with an assessment of individual agility levels.

There are numerous ways that the leadership agility framework can be used to enhance coaching conversations. Take as an example a line executive planning to lead a change initiative. If this executive habitually leads at

the Expert level and could benefit from an Achiever-like approach, three key questions can be used to stretch his or her context-setting agility, and likely make the initiative more effective:

- What conditions in the larger context are driving the need for this change?

- What is the scope of this change? (What will be changed and what will not be changed?)

- What are your desired outcomes? (How will you know this change is successful?)

These may seem like basic change-management questions, and they are. But they are questions that Expert leaders rarely ask. If the executive usually leads at the Achiever level and could benefit from a more Catalyst-like approach, the coach can follow each of the above questions with one that takes the executive's thinking to a deeper level:

- To what extent are the organization's culture and working relationships part of the reason this initiative is needed?

- What assumptions might you be making about the scope (boundaries) of your initiative that it might be useful to examine?

- What is a compelling vision for this change that could inspire others by conveying the deeper meaning or satisfaction it can have for them – and for you?

Another essential methodology for facilitating change in the leadership culture is team coaching. Really a set of methodologies, team coaching can include team assessments, facilitation of important real-time meetings and facilitation of off-site meetings designed to address special team issues. Team coaching can also involve the facilitation of "learning teams" of managers (intact or otherwise), who also work with the coach one-on-one.

In "learning team" sessions, managers receive both peer and professional feedback about their attempts to address real issues in a more agile and effective manner. The key is to use seasoned coaches who understand what each level of agility looks like for individuals, teams and organizations.

Facilitating Change: The Power of Executive Leadership

Work to shift the leadership culture at the top is essential for two reasons.

- First, unless new behavior is role-modeled at the top, it is unlikely to catch fire at other levels.

- Second, the coaching process can support executives in consciously promoting a new leadership culture among the managers in their own organizations. For example, an executive who wants to help his or her organization shift from an Expert to Achiever leadership culture can do a number of things to encourage various aspects of this shift: Emphasize cross-functional teamwork. Set up cross-functional teams to make needed organizational improvements. Model cross-functional teamwork. Tell stories that highlight the business value of cross-functional teamwork. Coach subordinates to increase their effectiveness in working cross-functionally. Reward them for constructive risk-taking in this area. Celebrate successes.

Facilitating Change: Enhanced Competency Models

The systems a company uses for talent management, including selection, training, performance evaluation, rewards and succession planning, can also be used to support the shift to a more agile leadership culture. Because these systems are typically based on criteria explicated in a companywide competency model, the model should ensure that it adequately specifies the levels of agility needed for effective leadership in the firm's emerging business environment.

One option taken by some companies is simply to treat agility as an additional competency. But this approach overlooks the fact that agility levels are rooted in developmental stages. Growth into a new stage fosters new internal capacities that enhance everything a leader does (Joiner & Josephs, 2007).

A more powerful alternative is to examine an existing competency model from the perspective of the levels of agility needed in the company's leadership culture, acknowledging that the desired agility level may be different for different management tiers in the hierarchy. This approach begins with an examination of the extent to which the competencies in the current model adequately represent those needed for the agility levels needed in the leadership culture. This is especially important for tiers of the organization that need to operate at the Catalyst level.

An informal review of competency models used in a range of industries indicates that, while Catalyst leadership behaviors appear here and there, the vast majority of competencies identified in these models are Achiever-level characteristics. One consequence of these models is that they lead to 360-feedback instruments that give many executives and high-potential managers very high scores, leaving them with the impression that they have little room left to grow. This is unfortunate when companies have such a great need for their high-functioning Achievers to continue their leadership development to new levels of agility.

Facilitating Change: Action Learning Programs

Another key application of competency models is leadership-development programming. Reflective action is both the essence of leadership agility and the primary means for developing from one level to another. For this reason, the best leadership-development programs for increasing agility levels are ones that emphasize action learning. The workshops in these programs need to show participants more agile approaches to challenging conversations, team issues or organizational change projects, and then guide them in applying these new approaches both during and after the workshop. Often the most effective action-learning experiences take place in well-planned programs that combine multiple learning modalities: 360-degree feedback, coaching, leadership workshops, learning teams, and individual or group projects (Dotlich and Noel, 1998; Raelin, 2008).

CEOs and other top executives frequently assume that they have reached a stage in their careers where they no longer need leadership training. If the world stood still, this assumption might be valid. However, the world is changing at faster and faster pace. In this context, even those Achiever-level executives who have been extremely successful in the past need to learn to lead at a new level of agility.

Regardless of the participants targeted by a particular action-learning program, experience has shown that it is not necessary to design some workshops for Experts and others for Achievers. What tends to work best is to find or design programs that can help both Expert and Achiever leaders develop to their next levels in at least three key application areas: leading organizational change, leading teams and navigating challenging business conversations. To do this, use programs that not only teach desired leadership practices and behaviors, but that simultaneously facilitate growth into the corresponding stages of adult development. Otherwise, the behaviors and practices extolled in these programs are not likely to stick (Joiner & Josephs, 2007).

Summary

The pace of change and degree of interdependence in today's global business environment demands that corporations develop organizations where at least the top tiers of management are capable of functioning at the Catalyst level. To rise to this historic challenge, organizations need to help many of their Achiever senior managers grow into the Catalyst level and many of their Expert middle managers develop to the Achiever level. And they need to focus not just on the development of individuals, but also on the development of leadership teams and the leadership culture. The task of bringing a leadership culture to a new level of agility is not something that can be accomplished by a few heroic leaders. It is necessarily a collective undertaking. P&S

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